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ABSTRACT

This document, which summarizes the study, "Reducing Barriers for Homeless Children and Youth for Access and Achievement," and the guide, "Educating Homeless Children and Youth: A Resource Guide for Promising Practices," provides evidence that state education agencies and local educational agencies have made significant progress in revising laws, policies, regulations, and practices that have served as barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and school achievement of homeless students. It addresses effective practices and policies that will help states and local educational agencies implement the new legislation and improve the quality of services for homeless children and youth. The studies found a number of promising practices that were helping homeless children and youth enroll and succeed in school. Regardless of whether they received federal funds under the McKinney-Vento Act, districts found ways to address at least some needs of homeless students. In addition to strategies addressing specific problem areas (transportation and raising awareness), there were cross-cutting strategies to address various issues: in keeping with the McKinney Act, states changed their laws or created special statutes for homeless children and youth; state coordinators played key roles in raising awareness, coordinating statewide activities, providing professional development, and collecting good data; and most districts had a homeless liaison. Collaborations and partnerships helped maximize district resources. (SM)

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PLANNING AND EVALUATION SERVICE

THE EDUCATION FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH PROGRAM: LEARNING TO SUCCEED

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volume I: Reducing Barriers for Homeless Children and Youth for Access and Achievement

Volume II: Educating Homeless Children and Youth: A Resource Guide for Promising Practices

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U. S. Department of Education
Rod Paige
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Office of the Under Secretary
Eugene Hickok
Under Secretary

Planning and Evaluation Service
Alan L. Ginsburg
Director

Elementary and Secondary Education Division
Ricky T. Takai
Director

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FOREWORD

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The new legislation embraces a vision of educational reform for elementary and secondary schools where no child is left behind. The reauthorized ESEA is built on four principles of educational reform: (1) increased accountability for student performance; (2) increased flexibility for States and local school districts; (3) expanded parental choice; and (4) a new focus on doing what works through research-based programs and practice.

In reauthorizing the ESEA, Congress amended the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to address the special needs of homeless children and youth The new McKinney-Vento legislation (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.) expands and further improves the educational opportunities of homeless children and youth by emphasizing immediate enrollment, transportation, and outreach to youth. This document focuses on the 1994 reauthorization since the data discussed here was collected before the 2001 reauthorization of McKinney-Vento.

In this document, which includes the study, *Reducing Barriers for Homeless Children and Youth for Access and Achievement,* and the guide, *Educating Homeless Children and Youth: A Resource Guide for Promising Practices,* the authors provide evidence that state education agencies (SEA) and local educational agencies (LEA) have made significant progress in revising laws, policies, regulations and practices that have served as barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and school achievement of homeless students. This report addresses effective practices and policies that will help states and local educational agencies implement the new legislation and improve the quality of services for homeless children and youth. We hope the report offers a better understanding of the challenges and specific strategies needed to increase enrollment, attendance and academic success for children and youth experiencing homelessness. Moreover, we believe this document and the efforts described herein are an important contribution to national efforts to ensure that no child is left behind.

THE EDUCATION FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH PROGRAM: LEARNING TO SUCCEED

Volume I: Reducing Barriers for Homeless Children and Youth for Access and Achievement

Volume II: Educating Homeless Children and Youth: A Resource Guide to Promising Practices

Executive Summary

I. Introduction

The *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program: Learning to Succeed* is a two-volume report on two studies that were conducted by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) under contracts with the Planning and Evaluation Service of the U.S. Department of Education. Volume I, *Reducing Barriers for Homeless Children and Youth for Access and Achievement*, reports on state and local efforts to serve the educational needs of homeless children and youth and overcome barriers that affect these students' enrollment, attendance, and school success. Volume II, *Educating Homeless Children and Youth: A Resource Guide to Promising Practices*, describes promising strategies and practices that states, districts and schools can use to enroll homeless children and youth in school, and to help them to achieve the same high standards expected of all children.

The studies found that homeless students are best served when promising practices are implemented as part of a comprehensive and coordinated homeless education program. States have made the most progress in eliminating immunization requirements as barriers to enrollment, but transportation, guardianship, and frequent moves from school to school are still significant barriers to educating homeless students. Regardless of whether or not they are awarded federal funds under the McKinney-Vento Act, districts are finding ways to address at least some needs of their homeless children and youth. However, districts with McKinney subgrants were able to provide a broader range of educational and recreational services. Districts with no McKinney dollars relied on funds from Title I and community organizations to support their efforts.

II. Background

Homeless children are a fast-growing segment of the population, as their numbers have increased 10 percent between 1997 and 2000 to 930,232. Two-thirds are in the age range from pre-*K* through grade 6. Approximately 87 percent of school-age homeless children and youth are enrolled in school, although only about 77 percent attend school regularly, and only 15 percent of homeless children are in preschool programs, according to the *Report to Congress: Fiscal Year 2000, Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.*

The Law and the Program

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which established the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY) and was amended and reauthorized in 2001, required that states take action to ensure that homeless children and youth have equal access to the same free and appropriate public education as all other children and youth. However, since these data were collected before the 2001 reauthorization, the 1994 reauthorization will be the most relevant law to examine.

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney Act (1994 reauthorization) stipulates that:

- *All homeless children and youth have a right to the same free and appropriate public education as other children and youth, including a public preschool education.*
- *States must review and revise residency laws and "other laws, regulations, practices, or policies that may act as a barrier to the enrollment, attendance, or success in school of homeless children and homeless youth."*
- *Students must not be separated from the mainstream school environment because of their homelessness.*
- *Homeless students should have access to educational services to enable them to meet the same challenging student performance standards to which all students are held.*

The 1994 Act required each state education agency (SEA) to have a State Coordinator of Education of Homeless Children and Youth, whose office is responsible for identifying homeless children and youth, assessing their special needs, facilitating coordination between state and local education agencies, and coordinating with other education and service providers. States also must develop and implement professional development programs that raise school personnel's awareness of, and ability to respond to, problems relating to the education of homeless children

The Act required that each state coordinator collect data on the numbers of homeless children and youth, the nature and extent of their problems, difficulties in identifying their special needs, progress made in addressing their problems, and program successes. This information is to be reported to the U.S. Department of Education every three years.

The McKinney Act Subtitle VII-B EHCY program was funded at $28.8 million in both fiscal years 1998 and 1999. SEAs received formula grants, and they, in turn, awarded discretionary grants to local education agencies (LEAs). States awarded 602 subgrants to LEAs to help homeless children and youth enroll in, attend, and succeed in school in the 1997-98 school year. These ranged from about $1,300 to $127,000 in 1998. About 4 percent of the nation's school districts received subgrants.

Districts offered an array of services and activities to provide homeless children and youth with a free and appropriate education. They usually identified homeless students, placed them in school, and provided them with transportation, as well as collaborated with local social service providers and worked to increase awareness of

issues relating to homeless children. Thirty-eight percent of state coordinators reported that subgrantees spent more of their McKinney Act funds on direct educational services for homeless children and youth than they did in 1994.

Overview of the Studies

Volume I, *Reducing Barriers for Homeless Children and Youth for Access and Achievement*, reports on state and local efforts to serve the educational needs of homeless children and youth and overcome barriers that affected these students' enrollment, attendance, and school success. The study investigated (1) the extent to which states and school districts have successfully removed barriers that impede homeless children's access to a free and appropriate education, (2) how states and districts have used federal McKinney-Vento Act funds to address the educational needs of homeless children and youth, and (3) how districts that do not receive McKinney Act funding have complied with the Act. Data for Volume I were collected by a combination of methods, including a survey of all state coordinators in the summer of 1998 and site visits between October 1998 and February 1999 to a sample of 14 local school districts, seven of which were McKinney subgrantees.

Volume II, *Educating Homeless Children and Youth: A Resource Guide to Promising Practices*, describes promising strategies and practices that states, districts and schools can use to enroll homeless children and youth in school, and to help them to achieve the same high standards expected of all children. This study described and analyzed four areas of state and local activity: (1) changes in education and services to homeless children and youth under the McKinney Act as it was reauthorized in 1994; (2) services and activities of state Offices of the Coordinator of Education of Homeless Children and Youth; (3) the McKinney Act subgrant award process, and how local education agencies (LEAs) with McKinney subgrants have supplemented the services available to homeless children and reduce barriers to their enrollment and success in school; and (4) the establishment of programs and policies for homeless students in LEAs. Data for Volume II were collected in the fall of 2000 by interviewing state coordinators in three states and making site visits to six districts recommended by current research and national experts.

IV. Key Findings

Barriers Facing Homeless Children and Youth

Homeless children continued to face a number of major barriers to enrolling and succeeding in school. However, some states and school districts have come up with ways to overcome these barriers.

Districts with McKinney subgrants were able to provide a broader range of educational and recreational services. Districts with no McKinney dollars relied on funds from Title I and community organizations to support their efforts. Most districts that did not have McKinney subgrants reported that they received no funds from outside

sources to serve homeless students. This was particularly true in smaller or more rural districts where homelessness was not commonly recognized as a problem.

Homeless students' frequent moves from school to school were their most significant barrier to academic success. Students who were unable to find stable shelter had difficulty meeting state or district mandates regarding the number of days they must attend school to stay enrolled. Some state coordinators indicated that the slow transfer of student records, along with differing course requirements from school to school, complicated the accrual of sufficient credits for homeless students to be promoted and receive a high school diploma. However, many districts have developed or revised policies to ensure that homeless students can enroll in school immediately. Some districts allow a grace period to track down records or obtain oral confirmation that a child had attended another school or been immunized.

- The Victoria Independent School District in Texas has limited school transfers by keeping students enrolled in the same schools despite families' mobility.
- The Chicago Board of Education developed a policy that provides guidance on identifying, enrolling, and transporting homeless children and youth.

Transportation to and from school remained a major barrier to homeless children enrolling and remaining in school. States and districts often have limited resources to address transportation needs, particularly across district lines. However, some States and school districts have found ways to meet the transportation needs of homeless children.

- Between 1994 and 1998, 10 states created laws, made efforts to enforce existing laws, relaxed enforcement of laws, or provided additional funding to make transportation less of a barrier.
- Chicago spent $2.1 million to bus homeless students, and was considering developing a database to better manage the complex problems of transporting homeless children.
- The Victoria Independent School District in Texas guaranteed transportation to a child's school of origin even if he or she moves during the school year.
- Small steps such as picking up homeless students first and dropping them off last, as was done in Fort Wayne, Indiana, helped reduce the stigma of homelessness.

Guardianship and immunization requirements were still significant barriers. Although important for safety and health, these requirements were often at variance with efforts to ensure that homeless children had access to school. However, some states have revised their laws, regulations, and policies to remove obstacles to the education of homeless children and youth.

- States have made the most progress since 1994 in eliminating immunization requirements as barriers to enrollment by either creating systems to immunize homeless students, create new laws or regulations, or change, enforce, or relax existing laws.
- Twelve states either created laws, made efforts to enforce existing laws, or relaxed enforcement of laws concerning guardianship policies, even though schools remain wary of eliminating guardianship requirements because of

liability concerns and fears that non-homeless students might abuse policies to enroll in popular schools.

Lack of awareness and insensitivity to homeless students' needs among school staff was another barrier that could delay or prevent homeless children and youth from enrolling and succeeding in school. However, many states are combating this lack of awareness and sensitivity.

- State coordinators raised awareness of the special needs of homeless students by distributing materials to school personnel and conducting staff development meetings.

Homeless students also had difficulty gaining access to special education, Head Start or other publicly funded preschool programs, gifted and talented programs, Even Start or other family literacy programs, and programs for students who are not proficient in English. In many cases, this is because educators are unfamiliar with the requirements of the law. However, some school districts went the extra mile to help homeless children gain access to these programs.

- For example, Baltimore County took special steps to ensure that homeless children participated in early childhood special education, gifted and talented, and service learning programs.

State coordinators collaborated and coordinated their work most often with local education agencies, state government agencies, other offices within their state agency, and homeless shelters to maximize funding and services.

- A Texas collaboration involving eight homeless shelters, the University of Texas, and several technology companies led to the Support for Homeless Education: Linking Technology Resources to Shelters (SHELTRS), which provided tutoring and computer-learning opportunities to homeless students.
- Oregon was able to quadruple its McKinney-Vento funds by supplementing them with Title I funds through the Title I, Part A Set-asides Initiative.
- Similarly, Illinois' coordinator encouraged districts to submit a consolidated Elementary and Secondary Education Act state plan to the U.S. Department of Education and to include their homeless education program in the plan, allowing homeless students in most of the state's districts to be served. "Homeless children are a subset of Title I," the coordinator said. "They are some of the poorest and neediest, so it is logical to tie the services together.

Many districts with McKinney subgrants sent information to schools about how to recognize and meet the needs of homeless children and youth, and a few provided school staff with professional development and training.

- The Santa Cruz, California homeless liaison surveyed principals about their schools' homeless education services and developed comprehensive resource guides for homeless children and their families.
- Both the Chicago and Baltimore Public Schools offered awareness-raising sessions for principals and school secretaries, who are key gatekeepers in enrolling homeless students.

- Bucks Country, Pennsylvania, and Chicago developed and disseminated printed materials on school-level requirements for serving homeless children and youth.
- A Maryland State Department of Education pamphlet "FACTS About Education for Homeless Children and Youth" was customized for every district in the state.

Most districts with McKinney subgrants had set up regular lines of communication between school officials and shelter providers, other service providers, and other educators to identify and place homeless children in school.

- For example, in Victoria, Texas, the district worked with a teen-parenting program to identify and enroll homeless teen-age mothers.
- Homeless youth also could be better served when their needs were addressed by a multidisciplinary team, as in Santa Cruz, California, where a team included a mental health worker, a social worker, and a Police Department Juvenile Officer.

Data collection, monitoring, and evaluation varied across the sites visited, often depending on the information to which districts had access and their capacity to maintain and report data. Some McKinney districts, in addition to conducting an "unduplicated count" of homeless students, as the law requires, collected data on participants' ethnicity, the percent of identified students or families served, parents' participation in activities, student attendance, and student academic achievement. However, other districts were unaware of the McKinney Act requirement to track homeless students' academic achievement. The non-subgrantee districts visited did not participate in data collection, monitoring, or evaluation of homeless students.

V. Conclusion

These studies found a number of promising practices that were helping homeless children and youth enroll and succeed in school. In addition to strategies that addressed specific problem areas, such as transportation and raising awareness, there were cross-cutting strategies to address a range of issues that homeless children and youth face.

- In keeping with the McKinney Act, states changed their laws or created special statutes for homeless children and youth. Districts also adopted policies to reinforce and strengthen the McKinney Act.

- State coordinators played a key role in raising awareness, coordinating statewide activities, providing professional development on educating homeless children and youth, and collecting good data on homeless children and youth and program results.

- Most districts had a homeless liaison – not just the 4 percent of districts that received McKinney-Vento grants. Liaisons identify homeless students, enroll them in school, arrange their transportation, and make referrals to health care and other services, while coordinating the activities of local service providers. They also raise public awareness about homelessness.

Collaborations and partnerships helped maximize district resources. Districts had a greater impact by coordinating with local social services, housing, and other agencies serving homeless children and their families.

Homeless students are best served when promising practices are implemented as part of a comprehensive and coordinated homeless education program. Ultimately, the success of any homeless education program requires coordinated action by many individuals, and is measured by whether all homeless students are identified, enrolled, and educated appropriately.

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